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SUBJECT: GENDER REALITY IN TURKMENISTAN

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**¶1.** (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution

**¶2.** (SBU) SUMMARY: Turkmenistan's Constitution and the law on state guarantees of equality of women provide for equal rights for women and men, however, in practice women do not always enjoy equal rights. Turkmen authorities themselves violate the law on women's equality by unofficially banning travel abroad by female state employees under the age of 30, discouraging women employees from driving vehicles, and prohibiting women to wear pants to work. To demonstrate equality of women with men in government representation, women are appointed to certain high-level positions in the government, but their role as real decision-makers appears limited. According to a local expert on gender issues, despite the population's expectation that the gender situation would improve under Berdimuhamedov, the opposite is true; the situation has deteriorated with an increased emphasis on "traditionalism" leading to a diminished role for women in Turkmen society. END SUMMARY.

YOUNG WOMEN NOT ALLOWED ABROAD

**¶3.** (SBU) While Turkmenistan acceded and ratified the Convention on Women's Rights and the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the country's Constitution and the Law on state guarantees of equality of women provide for equal rights of women and men, in reality the authorities themselves violate several aspects of gender equality. For example, there is an unofficial rule that does not permit unmarried female state employees under the age of 30 to travel abroad. (NOTE: Young female non-state employees are often questioned at the airport and have encountered trouble travelling abroad. END NOTE.) The presidential apparatus is the state body that approves or denies participation of government employees in business trips or trainings abroad. Recently, it did not approve the candidacy of a young female State Border Service employee to travel to

London on a State Department INL-funded visit organized for the best graduates of its English language training program. Although the authorities did not provide a reason for refusing to approve her participation, it was clear that the motive behind the decision was gender-based since the male participants were approved.

#### NO DRIVING, NO PANTS AT WORK

14. (SBU) Women working at government entities are reportedly discouraged from driving. Some supervisors, when talking to their female employees who drive, make it clear that there is an unstated rule discouraging women from driving vehicles. The authorities also unofficially ban women working in government agencies from wearing pants. According to a female employee of one of the state enterprises, "We are not allowed to wear pants even on Saturdays when we work till lunchtime." The unstated ban on pants was introduced during the Niyazov period and has been retained by the current government.

Traditionally, Turkmen women wear long traditional dresses, and the government spread "Turkmen dress culture" to government offices, universities and colleges.

#### WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT

15. (SBU) In accordance with Article 9/2 of the Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights of Women, "the state guarantees provision to women of equal rights with men in entering state service in line with their capabilities and professional training." However in practice, women get elected or appointed only to positions in Parliament or certain social sectors of the government such as

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education, healthcare, social welfare or public organizations and institutes. In order to balance traditional patriarchal dominance in the state system, a woman is chair of the Mejlis (Parliament), a woman holds the position of Deputy Chairperson of Cabinet of Ministers for Culture and Mass Media, women occupy positions as Minister of Education, Director of National Democracy and Human Rights Institute, Director of Women's Union, Deputy Minister of Healthcare, and Deputy Governors of Provinces overseeing Education, Healthcare, Culture and Sports. However, it is not clear to what extent these women operate as real decision-makers, although they figure prominently in the government's public face presented in the media and to foreign officials.

#### WOMEN'S EDUCATION

16. (SBU) Traditionally, Turkmen are respectful of women. Women are perceived as wives and mothers. Historically, Turkmen women never covered their faces. Soviet period of rule played a significant role in advancing gender equality in Turkmen society, providing educational and work opportunities to women. Currently, realizing the importance of education for professional career development, more women choose to study and receive training. According to the most recent population census done in 1995, literacy among people ages 15 and over was 98,3 percent among women and 99,3 percent among men. The figures indicate that the literacy rate among women and men in Turkmenistan are nearly equal. Yet, if there are several girls and one boy in a Turkmen family, parents would choose to spend their earnings to provide education for the boy rather than for the girls. This is the result of a cultural stereotype that the boy as a male would eventually be a main bread-winner and needs education more than girls.

#### GENDER SITUATION DETERIORATES

¶7. (SBU) Gulistan Yazkuliyeva, an expert on gender issues who works as a local consultant on gender issues for the American Bar Association, USAID, UNDP, and the UN Population Fund, has noted that attention by Turkmen authorities to gender issues has gone down. According to her, not much is done on gender issues in Turkmenistan, especially in the provinces.

Gender is perceived as an issue only for women. Yazkuliyeva used to hold trainings on gender issues, women's rights, and reproductive health at the Women's Union, State Statistics Committee and various local universities. However, despite the fact that there is public demand for gender education, the administrators of these and other state entities do not see the need to provide such training seminars. According to Yazkuliyeva, "the new head of the Women's Union does not seem to be interested in gender education among women. All the Union does now is organize mass cultural events for national festivities, to which they dedicate most of their time."

¶8. (SBU) When asked how she assessed the Law on State Guarantees of Equality of Women, she said "de jure, all of Turkmen laws are good, de facto, they are not enforced, meaning they are good only on paper." Yazkuliyeva shared her disappointment with the fact that when the new president came to power, she along with many other people had hoped there would be positive changes in terms of gender equality. Instead, it turned out to be the other way around; traditionalism in gender issues became even stricter. She thought it did not necessarily reflect the president's view on gender issues, but rather the views of other high-level officials that adhere to ethnic

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culture and traditionalism in gender matters. Yazkuliyeva expressed a hope that more engagement by the international community in conducting gender trainings would have a positive influence on gender equality in the country.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: While Turkmenistan has adopted an adequate gender-equality legal framework, in practice it is not enforced. Instead of guaranteeing enforcement of the law, the authorities themselves violate it. Many had hoped that with the new president, the gender situation in the country would improve, and many of the mistakes made by the former government in terms of gender would be corrected. However, the current gender reality of Turkmenistan shows a different trajectory with a tendency to go backwards to traditionalism and patriarchal ethnic gender culture. END COMMENT.

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